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HOUSEHOLD CALENDAR

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Another Chapter on Buying Silks

A radio talk by Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Thursday, April 16, 1936.

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MR. SALISBURY: Now, turning again to our weekly Household Calendar, Miss Van Deman tells me that she's going to add another chapter on silk fabrics, following up her talk of last week.

By the way, Miss Van Deman, I was sorry I couldn't hear what you had to say on the subject last week. This question of quality in silks isn't an exclusively feminine topic. Men are up against it all the time in buying neckties. Can't you give us some foolproof formula for picking fabrics that will stand the gaff of being pulled and tied without getting wrinkled and stringy after about the third time?

MISS VAN DEMAN: I just wish I could, but I don't think anybody's ever studied that phase of the silk question. Of course it would help some if silk neckties were definitely labeled "Pure-dye" or "Weighted". Then at least you would know before hand that a silk carrying a lot of mineral substance in its meshes would be likely to crease and stay creased more than a fabric that was made of all pure silk.

Since the talk last week several people have sent me samples of silk that have proved a very bad bargain for them. When I held a lighted match under one of these, a blue and white print, we laughed and said it ought to be called mineral cloth rather than silk, and labeled "practically fireproof". The flame ran over the sample and blackened and shriveled it. But the ash that was left was almost the size of the original piece of goods. I could even see the white leaf design in the charred remains.

MR. SALISBURY: Well, what I'd like to have straightened out in my mind is why all this business of loading silk with mineral salts anyway? What started it? That's the object?

MISS VAN DEMAN: To get the greatest possible number of yards of fabric from a given quantity of raw silk. And at the same time to make the fabric seem heavy and luxurious without using more silk than necessary. Silk here in our part of the world is an expensive textile fiber. Raw silk always sells by the pound. It's so valuable that it comes east from the Pacific Coast on special trains under heavy guard. Maybe you've been on a train and had it shunted onto a side track to give right of way to one of these silk trains. A friend of mine tells me that was her experience once, and it certainly did impress her with the money value of silk.

In every pound of this raw silk there is a certain amount of gum deposited by the silkworm as it spins the fibers around its cocoon. Before the manufacturer can dye the silk and weave it into cloth he has to boil off this gum. A pound of raw silk may lose as much as a fifth of its weight in this degumming process. So somebody thought up the idea of compensating for this loss of weight in the raw silk by immersing the silk fabric in a bath of

( 100% )

mineral salts. The idea at first was just to bring the silk back to "par", that is let it absorb enough mineral to replace the gum. But once the pernicious practice started, of course the temptation was to add more and more weighting - in fact all that the fibers would stand without having the fabric fall to pieces before the manufacturer and the retailer could get it off the hands and into the consumer's possession.

Finally things reached such a pass that in 1928 the silk manufacturers got together and drew up an agreement among themselves to stop this excessive weighting of their fabrics. This was not binding, however, and it was not until the matter came to the attention of the Federal Trade Commission in 1932 that definite steps were taken toward the truthful labeling of silks as pure dye and weighted. Even so, this labeling is not compulsory and much of the silk goods that you find in the stores today carries no tag to tell you whether you are buying silk or tin. Also as I remarked last week, ready-made dresses accurately labeled with information about the silk are just about as scarce as hen's teeth. Maybe you have heard of some of the research that Dr. Pauline Beery Mack of Pennsylvania State College has done on this question of silk weighting.

Well, at least we have got this far. If you see silk of any color except black labeled "pure dye" you may know that it contains no more than 10 percent of weighting. Black silk may have up to 15 percent and still be labeled pure dye. And under this plan if you see silks labeled "weighted" that means that they contain more than 10 percent of substances not silk. The tendency in making silk seems to be away from the excessive weighting practiced so extensively a few years ago. The new synthetic fabrics retailing at moderate prices are apparently satisfying our desire for sheen and swish and slip and some of the other qualities that put a premium on silk.

MR. SALISBURY: Thank you, Miss Van Deman. We'll look for your talk next week on Wednesday. Let me remind listeners that the information given today by Miss Van Deman, and many other facts revealed by home economics studies are reported in U. S. D. A. Leaflet 105-L., "Quality Guides in Buying Ready-Made Dresses." If anyone wishes it, he may send his request to the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D. C.

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